Although so much has changed in the last century, the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is a remarkable constant, with its continuing excellence in horticulture, innovative garden design and breathtaking displays of the latest plants grown to perfection.

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one hundred years ago this year, the RHS Chelsea Flower Show was held for the first time. It was then a three-day affair (Tuesday to Thursday, 20–22 May 1913), with 244 exhibitors—roughly half of them nurseries, and a third sundriesmen (manufacturers of glasshouses, retailers of gardening tools and chemicals, stands for gardening magazines, and makers of garden furniture). The remainder were a mixture of amateur gardeners—most representing the still-thriving world of country-house gardening—and professional garden designers.

Great Spring Show

Visitors coming to that first RHS Chelsea Flower Show knew what to expect. This was the third incarnation of the RHS Great Spring Show, which had begun at the RHS Garden in Kensington in 1862 and moved to the gardens of the Inner Temple in 1888, the year the Kensington garden was closed. Many of the innovations we associate with Chelsea were in fact introduced at the Temple, most notably the construction of show gardens in the open air.

The Great Spring Show was cancelled in 1912, in order that the RHS, together with other organisations, could stage the Royal International Horticultural Exhibition, this had been held in the grounds of the Chelsea Hospital, and the RHS moved its show there to take advantage of the excellent site—twice as large as that at the Temple. So all the elements were in place—nurseries, amateur exhibitors, sundriesmen, gardens and an international contingent (in that first year two French rose nurseries had stands under the tent).

How do you hope that creating this show garden will benefit the charity Sentebale?

I have always found gardening, working with the land and nurturing plants has a way of rebuilding lives. While not gardening-focused, Sentebale is a hugely positive and uplifting charity, so the themes are compatible. The reach of RHS Chelsea Flower Show is vast, so many more people will have heard of Sentebale and Lesotho by the end of it.

What will happen to the garden after the show has ended?

I hope we can auction it off. It deserves a longer life; some elements will translate to other environments, such as the pavilion and the hearts-and-crowns terrace.

New plants at Chelsea 2013

Clematis Samaritan Jo (‘Evipo05’)

Exhibited by: Raymond Evison
Location: Great Pavilion, stand E30 (see Show Catalogue for map).

Why is it special? This is one of three new clematis being introduced by Raymond Evison, and has an unusual flower colour and graceful scent. It is named in recognition of the work of Samaritan, the Christian relief charity based in Kent and founded by the late John Samaritan. The charity, which is based at Southfields, has a particular interest in training Chelsea Pensioners. Samaritan helps Chelsea Pensioners to return to work, get degrees or start businesses. The charity’s mission is to give Chelsea Pensioners’ coats.

Echinopsis ‘Chelsea Centurion’

Exhibited by: Bryan and Linda Goodey of Southfields Nurseries in Lincolnshire.
Location: Great Pavilion, D1.

Why is it special? Bryan and Linda are fascinated by their cross-breeding of cacti cultivars. Bryan has grown cacti commercially for 30 years. He has a particular interest in developing cultivars with unusual flowering characteristics and longer flowering times. It has taken around eight years for Echinopsis ‘Chelsea Centurion’ to be ready and it was earmarked last summer for a Chelsea 2013 launch. ‘We’ve had our eye on it for some time, and felt it fitted the bill perfectly’, says Linda, who added that the red flowers reminded them of Chelsea Pensioners’ coats. Between April and May, plants display fuchsia-red ant, large, rich red flowers that have a deeper red tinge to the outside edges of petals. The plant will flower periodically throughout summer, if given adequate light. This new cactus is said to be easily grown indoors on a sunny windowsill, in a conservatory or glasshouse.

RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2013: B&Q Sentebale ‘Forget-me-not’ Garden

Designer: Jimmy Blom.
Background Information: Sentebale (which means forget-me-not) is a charity founded by HRH Prince Harry and Prince Seeiso of Lesotho to support Lesotho’s vulnerable children, including victims of poverty and HIV/AIDS.

Location: MA36 (see Show Catalogue for map).

What are the key themes for your Chelsea garden?

I can’t imagine many people know much about Lesotho. It is a discrete country—known as the ‘Sky Kingdom’—not just part of South Africa. I want to evoke some of the country’s elements: the round houses, striated mountain tops, and beautiful green valleys filled with willows. Also vital is the concept of two princes caring for their peoples. Lesotho is twinned with Wales; these ties are strong.

What did you decide to translate from Lesotho to your garden design?

I visited Lesotho for the first time in April, but had to design the garden without having been there. I decided to make a contemporary interpretation of elements I found through reading, photos and discussions with Sentebale. My evocation rests in the concept of Lesotho as a country of dry mountains with abundant water lower down in the landscape. River valleys have willows and some Gunnera, which I hope to emulate partly through planting. By contrast, the pavilion designed to evoke the round houses stands on a dry contoured ‘mountain’.

What key plants feature in the garden?

I have some beautiful, characterful polluted willows. I think it may surprise people that they grow in Lesotho, as they don’t look African. We didn’t use Gunnera because it is potentially invasive, so included Rodgersia and Rheum instead. Memoria and Tubaghas are naives—as is Papaver aculeatum, which I am praying flowers in time.

Other appropriate plants I hope to use include Silene fimbriata with its nodding, frilled white flowers, and forget-me-nots (Myosotis). I have some surprises up my sleeve, too.

What will happen to the garden after the show has ended?

I am praying in time. I have some surprises up my sleeve, too.
More gardens at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2013

Show garden: ‘Stop the Spread Garden’
Designer: Jo Thompson.
Description: A garden to highlight the threat to British plants from pests, diseases and invasive plants. Lush herbaceous planting borders a sunken area and contrasts with a stark avenue of dead trees.
Sponsor: The Food and Environment Research Agency.
Location: MA18 (see Show Catalogue for map).

Show garden: ‘The Sound of Silence’
Designer: Fernando Gonzalez.
Description: A garden inspired by the austerity of Japanese Zen gardens, which are often designed as representations of the course of human life. This garden will feature a bonsai and rocks made from acrylic stone.
Sponsor: Viking River Cruises.
Location: FR22.

Artisan garden: ‘NSPCC What will we leave?’
Designers: Adam Woolcott and Jonathan Smith.
Description: A garden inspired by the magic of childhood, complete with treehouse and wishing pond, and depicting a children’s tea party.
Sponsor: NSPCC.
Location: SEW5.

New plants at Chelsea 2013

Meconopsis punicea ‘Sichuan Silk’
- Exhibited by: Gary McDermott of Harperley Hall Farm Nurseries, Co. Durham.
- Location: Great Pavilion, C18.
- Why is it special?: Visitors to the Gardening Scotland show in 2012 will have seen beautiful Meconopsis punicea ‘Sichuan Silk’ exhibited by the Scottish Rock Garden Club.
- Describe: Discovered by plant hunter and alpine specialist Ian Christie on the Tibetan plateau in 2003, this is a perennial strain of red Chinese Meconopsis. Until now only monocarpic plants (those that flower, set seed and then die) have been available. Gary says that it is difficult to tell which seedlings are perennial and which are monocarpic. ‘It has been a long process to pick out perennial plants and we still only have limited stock.’ The blood-red petals are long, papery and slightly twisted, drooping gracefully from wiry stems to 75cm (30in). This splendid plant requires a fertile, humus-rich, acid soil in a cool, moist but well-drained position in part shade to flourish.

Rhododendron ‘Water Baby’
- Exhibited by: David Milias of Milias Nurseries, Surrey.
- Location: Great Pavilion, F8.
- Why is it special?: Among 10 new rhododendrons to be displayed by Milias Nurseries are late-flowering, scented selections with blue foliage, which the late Ted Milias started breeding in the 1990s.
- Describe: His son David, who now runs the business, says that Rhododendron ‘Water Girl’ and R. ‘Midsummer Mermaid’ are sister seedlings of R. viscosum, a variable species from the mountains of eastern USA - some plants flowering in May, others as late as July. Ted selected those that were late flowering and displayed blue foliage. Resulting from a further cross of Rhododendron viscosum with R. ‘Water Girl’, R. ‘Water Baby’ has red buds opening to scented pink blooms in June and July above blue foliage. Plants can reach 1.5m (5ft) in 10 years. I named it about four years ago and am pleased to have enough stock to introduce it at Chelsea 2013,’ says David.

Sichuan Silk' exhibited by Meconopsis punicea

Modern times
Chelsea grew in every direction after the war. In 1951, the arrangement of smaller tents was replaced by the Great Marquee, which spent decades being known as the world’s largest tent. (In 2000, it was replaced by a new modular pavilion, and the old canvas tent was cut up to make bags, aprons and the like, marketed by the Old Chelsea Marquee Company.)

The number of exhibits grew: today it is more than double the figure for 1913. The number of show gardens has grown similarly: from an original 17 to a figure in the 40s today. And the crowds grew, to the point where, in 1987, the turnstiles had to be closed and visitors kept waiting until the numbers inside had diminished. The following year a ceiling of 40,000 tickets per day was imposed; that same year, ticket toots first appeared outside the show, and have become a permanent feature.

Over the past century there have been more than 8,900 exhibitors (not including the nearly 1,500 individuals, companies and societies who have taken part in the...
various competitions). No single firm has exhibited at every single Chelsea show, but among the exhibitors at the first Chelsea, there are three who are still exhibiting today, a century later: iris and peony specialist Kelways, Blackmore & Langdon with its remarkable delphiniums, and orchid grower McBean’s. And there has been an international presence at every Chelsea, from French rose growers in 1913 to the Barbados Horticultural Society and overseas garden designers today.

The purpose of RHS Chelsea Flower Show is to promote horticulture and to exhibit gardening at its best. Chelsea has become a global event, not merely a British one. Long may we build on its remarkable success.

Construction of show gardens at Chelsea (above) has always been a painstaking process, as can be seen from the building of this example by H Freemantle in 1931.

Located within the Great Pavilion, the RHS Environment area focuses on ‘The Evolving Garden’: exhibits cover gardening topics from the past and look to the future. They explain the science and environmental advances that underpin the importance of gardens and plants.

Exhibits in 2013 will include:
- **Groundwork UK** showing how any space can quickly be brought to life for the benefit of local communities using temporary gardens.
- **University of Reading** presenting results of research into creating a more biodiverse, eco-friendly and floral grass-free lawn.
- **Kings Seeds with Quercus Fencing** examine how events and lifestyle changes influence attitudes as to what, where and how we grow what we eat.

The final day of Chelsea is best known for its sell off of plants, which results in interesting sights as visitors head for home (above).

More on RHS Chelsea Flower Show

To mark the centenary of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, the RHS has published a new book and a special supplement to *The Garden*.

- **RHS Chelsea Flower Show: A Centenary Celebration**, by Brent Elliott. This fascinating history runs from the earliest RHS flower shows to memorable personalities and exhibits of more recent years. Frances Lincoln, April 2013, ISBN 9780711234512, RRP £25. RHS price £20 available from [www.rhsshop.co.uk](http://www.rhsshop.co.uk)

- In addition, RHS members will receive the *Chelsea Centenary* supplement enclosed free with this issue of *The Garden*. This souvenir publication includes features on the history of the show, advances in gardening tools and equipment, changing fashions in garden design, memorable plants, exhibitors, and a look at how the impact of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show spreads through London, horticulture and the world.